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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 BANJUL 000332

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SUBJECT: THE U.S./GAMBIAN RELATIONSHIP: DEPARTING
AMBASSADOR'S ASSESSMENT

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOSEPH STAFFORD, REASON 1.4 (B AND D)

SUMMARY

1. (C) The U.S./Gambian relationship remains strained, due primarily to President Jammeh's increasingly authoritarian leadership and consequent decline in the human rights environment here -- a decline that figured prominently in the June 2006 suspension of The Gambia's eligibility for the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA) program. Reversing the negative human rights trend is the leading U.S. priority in The Gambia, but lack of pressure on the GOTG from other donors, Taiwan, in particular, is a key constraint on our efforts. Jammeh's courting of Iran and Venezuela was evident at the Gambian-hosted "midterm" African Union Summit in June/July 2006. In the intervening year since the Summit, Jammeh's regional standing has eroded, as underscored by frayed ties with such neighbors as Senegal and Ghana; it remains to be seen whether the new Nigerian President -- or another African leader -- will take over Obasanjo's role as Jammeh's mentor and mediator.

2. (C) Jammeh's erratic behavior on both domestic and foreign policy casts doubt on his effectiveness as a partner on counter-terrorism and other key areas of interest to the U.S. Notwithstanding Jammeh's behavior, Gambians continue to indicate appreciation for our efforts on behalf of the country's development and poverty alleviation. As a moderate, peaceful Muslim country in a turbulent region, The Gambia remains fertile ground for our public diplomacy initiatives. In short, while The Gambia, a small, impoverished country, can do little to influence U.S. interests for good or ill, I nonetheless see compelling reasons for our continued engagement here -- and there have also been "rough patches" in the U.S./Gambian relationship in the past. END SUMMARY .

THE "ROUGH PATCH" CONTINUES

13. (C) As my assignment here approaches its end, the strains evident in the U.S./Gambian relationship over the past year and a half persist, with no clear prospect of their easing soon. The strains are due primarily to Gambian President Yahya Jammeh's increasingly authoritarian leadership, and, as a consequence, the negative human rights and governance trends that prevail in this country. Manifestations of these trends range from arbitrary detention and mistreatment of oppositionists and others to flawed elections due to the ruling party's irregularities to a crackdown on private media institutions. An abortive coup plot here in March 2006 was a major factor in the negative trends, as an enraged, vindictive Jammeh responded by ordering the roundup of numerous potential suspects as well as the closure of a privately owned, anti-GOTG journal, the "Independent."

14. (C) The abuses following the failed plot figured prominently in the Millennium Challenge Corporation's (MCC) June 2006 decision to suspend The Gambia's eligibility for the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA) program, which held the prospect of a substantial increase in U.S. development assistance to this country.* The volatile Gambian leader reacted defiantly, as his senior aide brusquely rejected the Embassy's offer of consultations on the MCA reinstatement process. Indicative of Jammeh's iron-fisted control of his cabinet, his Finance and Economy Minister recently confided to Ambassador that he fully recognized the potentially vital contribution of the MCA program to The Gambia's development and was keen to meet and discuss MCA eligibility reinstatement -- but also made clear that Jammeh would not permit such discussions, at least for the present. In his public statements over the past months, Jammeh has refrained from citing the USG by name, but we are clearly a prime target in his venomous attacks on the "West" over its alleged exploitation and bullying of Africa.

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ADVANCING THE TOP U.S. PRIORITY

15. (C) The abuses that led to the suspension of MCA eligibility serve to highlight the overriding U.S. objective here -- promoting an improved human rights environment and stronger democratic institutions. In pursuing this objective, the Embassy will need to continue using the full array of tools at its disposal, ranging from dialog with the GOTG and civil society to public diplomacy initiatives such as International Visitor Grants for human rights activists and workshops for journalists. While mindful of the stringent resource environment, I believe that additional resources are needed to maximize the effectiveness of our strategy for advancing the leading U.S. interest in this country. At present, available funding consists largely of a meager (\$31,000 in FY-06) DHRF fund. Accordingly, the Embassy's Mission Strategic Plan for FY-2009 contains proposals for two ESF-funded projects of \$300,000 each; the proposed projects are designed to strengthen the capacity and autonomy of the National Assembly and judiciary, respectively.

16. (C) To be sure, Jammeh's authoritarian tendencies represent a major constraint on our efforts to advance our human rights agenda. In our approaches to senior Gambian officials, many signal their personal concern over the negative human rights trend here. At the same time, they also indicate that they are in no position to mount any initiatives to bring about reversal of that trend, as Jammeh's dominance of his government's decision-making is so thorough as to leave no room for any such initiative.

LACK OF PRESSURE FROM OTHER DONORS

17. (C) Another major constraint on our lobbying on human rights is the lack of pressure from key donors, Taiwan, in

particular. Over the past year, Taiwan has displaced Britain, the former colonial power, as the leading bilateral donor here, providing an estimated \$20 million or more in aid. While my Taiwanese counterpart claims to be concerned over Jammeh's backsliding on human rights, the risk of alienating Jammeh and possibly causing him to consider reaching out to the PRC rules out any significant Taiwanese pressure on the Gambian President. The British High Commission uses its dialog with the GOTG to flag human rights issues, and most of its annual assistance of around \$10 million goes to improve governance -- e.g., payment of Commonwealth judges' salaries, reform of public finance. The European Union is the leading multilateral donor; resident European Commission officials have indicated that, while the human rights situation here is worrisome, it is not grave enough as yet to warrant warning the GOTG of possible repercussions for assistance. Finally, as indicated below, Jammeh is cultivating two potential key donors, Iran and Venezuela, that can hardly be expected to exert any pressure on the Gambian leader over human rights matters.

ANOTHER UNWELCOME TREND -- COURTING OF IRAN AND VENEZUELA

18. (C) Jammeh's angry, resentful reaction to the suspension of MCA eligibility also included overtures to Iran and Venezuela; he personally invited the respective leaders to the Gambian-hosed African Union Summit in July 2006. Chavez and Ahmadinejad duly accepted the invitation and used the Summit to deliver predictable anti-U.S./Western statements. In subsequent months, Jammeh has exchanged visits with Ahmadinejad and travelled to Venezuela, while GOTG officials and their Iranian and Venezuelan counterparts have signed an array of cooperation agreements in economic and other fields. The GOTG recently opened an embassy in Tehran, and Iran is expected to reciprocate within the next month or so. GOTG officials indicate no plans for a similar exchange of diplomatic missions with Venezuela, whose embassy in Senegal covers The Gambia, while the latter's embassy in Washington has responsibility for Venezuela.

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19. (C) Beyond defiance of Washington and the West generally and photo ops with the Iranian and Venezuelan leaders, Jammeh's overtures are obviously designed to generate economic and other assistance. Despite denials by Gambian officials, there are credible reports that Chavez extended a \$30 million grant during Jammeh's recent visit and that Iran has to date provided grants totalling \$10 million. GOTG officials seek Iranian and Venezuelan involvement in the development of The Gambia's hoped-for oil resources. We are as yet unable to verify vague reports of Iranian arms shipments to The Gambia, but various contacts report that a 15-man Iranian military team is providing "special forces" training to personnel of the Gambian President's militia unit at his home village of Kanilai.

REDUCED STANDING IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

10. (C) Although only 42, Jammeh has ruled The Gambia since 1994, and his craving for recognition as a veteran African statesman was doubtless the leading motivation for his hosting the "midterm" African Union Summit in June/July 2006. However, the intervening year has witnessed, if anything, erosion in Jammeh's regional standing. In the sub-region, his meddling in Senegal's Casamance rebellion has only added to long-standing strains with Senegalese President Wade. Our contacts say that ties with Ghana remain cool because of the still-unsolved killing here of 40 or so Ghanaian youths in July 2005. (NOTE: According to credible sources, the victims were would-be emigrants to Spain and were killed by Gambian police who suspected them of being rebels. END NOTE) The Mauritanian Ambassador confided to Ambassador that, despite

the traditionally close Gambian/Mauritanian relationship, recently elected Mauritanian President Abdellahi had so far adopted an arms-length attitude toward Jammeh. The Mauritanian Ambassador spoke of concern in Nouakchott over Jammeh's erratic behavior -- e.g., his self-proclaimed powers to cure HIV/AIDS, asthma, and diabetes. Jammeh was conspicuous by his absence from both the ECOWAS and AU Summits in January, and it is uncertain whether he will attend the upcoming "midterm" AU Summit in Accra.

¶11. (C) Our sense is that former Nigerian President Obasanjo was the African leader with the greatest influence over Jammeh. At crucial junctures, then-President Obasanjo served as an effective mediator with Jammeh, attending the October 2005 Senegalese/Gambian summit that defused a severe bilateral crisis over transportation and border issues. In February 2006, Obasanjo successfully mediated between the Gambian leader and his political opposition, brokering an agreement that restored dialog among Jammeh's ruling party and the opposition parties. With Obasanjo's departure from the Presidency, it remains to be seen whether his successor -- or another African leader -- can take over the role of Jammeh's mentor and mediator.

HOW RELIABLE A PARTNER?

¶12. (C) Jammeh's erratic behavior on both domestic and foreign policy means that his cooperation and support for U.S. initiatives in the region and elsewhere cannot be taken for granted. In the past, his staunch support for the Global War on Terrorism translated into concrete support for U.S. counter-terrorism (CT) efforts. A key GOTG interlocutor on CT issues, the National Intelligence Agency's (NIA) head, has assured us of his -- and Jammeh's -- commitment to continued CT cooperation. Nonetheless, as the GOTG's ties with Iran, in particular, evolve, the prospect of fallout on our CT relationship cannot be ruled out. (NOTE: In fact, past months have witnessed a slowdown in our CT cooperation, but this appears to be due to internal disarray at the NIA, not Iranian or other external influences. END NOTE)

¶13. (C) Nor can we rule out the possibility of the GOTG's emerging Iranian connection affecting the U.S./Gambian military relationship. At present, senior GOTG civilian and military officials indicate that they value our modest

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military cooperation program, centered on IMET, and urge its expansion. (NOTE: In fact, as part of U.S. efforts to promote democratic values within the Gambian military, our IMET program registered a small increase, from \$75,000 to \$115,000, in FY-07. END NOTE) The GOTG, citing the Gambian contingent of 200 troops (and 100 police officers) serving with AMIS in Darfur, continues to request peacekeeping-related training and equipment assistance. We have replied that we can make no commitments and that the Gambians' case for such assistance would be strengthened were they to expand the size of their Darfur contingent. The GOTG, in turn, has conditioned its willingness to supply additional forces on donor agreement to provide the Gambians with six APCs, among other assistance.

PROMOTING THE GAMBIA'S DEVELOPMENT

¶14. (C) Notwithstanding their President's anti-U.S./Western sentiments, Gambians also continue to indicate appreciation for our efforts on behalf of the country's development and poverty alleviation. With the suspension of MCA eligibility, the centerpiece of our efforts is the 100-strong Peace Corps contingent here, but our other initiatives, ranging from grass-roots Self Help projects to our girls' scholarship program, are also applauded. Bilateral investment and trade links remain exceedingly modest; U.S. investment here totals no more than \$5 million or so, while annual two-way trade --

most of its U.S. exports -- amounts to several hundred thousand dollars. At the same time, the U.S. Trade and Development Agency's (USTDA) involvement here has given a boost to our economic links. In recent years, USTDA has financed two feasibility studies here, involving construction of a petroleum storage terminal and a coal-fired power plant. The Gambia retained eligibility for the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) program in 2007, but we conveyed to the GOTG Washington's warning that retaining eligibility would hinge on an improved record on human rights and governance. As it is, The Gambia has yet to take much advantage of its AGOA eligibility, with AGOA-qualified exports to the U.S. less than \$100,000 annually.

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: PRO-U.S. ENVIRONMENT

¶15. (C) As a moderate Muslim country in a turbulent region, The Gambia remains fertile ground for our public diplomacy efforts. There is a discernible pro-U.S. feeling in the society that is striking -- and notably warmer than that vis-a-vis the former colonial power, Britain. Gambians from all walks of life, both elites and the public at large, make no secret of their admiration of America's democracy, its economic and technological prowess, and its culture of openness and change. Jammeh himself, despite his resentment toward the USG, seeks to cast himself as a friend of the U.S.

The Gambia's recent hosting of the much-publicized Miss Black USA Scholarship Pageant, a ten-day extravaganza involving dozens of participants from the U.S., was Jammeh's personal initiative. For a country so small, a remarkably large number of Gambians have extensive experience in the U.S. Numerous GOTG officials have pursued university studies in the U.S. The military is replete with officers that received training in the U.S. under IMET. The upshot is that, for many Gambians, positive views of the U.S. are based, not on a distant, utopian image, but on the reality of daily life in the U.S. While there is anti-U.S. criticism in the press, particularly in the government's mouthpiece, the "Daily Observer," it and other journals also routinely give positive coverage to Embassy activities, e.g. inauguration of USG-funded development projects, official receptions, etc.

REASONS TO STAY ENGAGED

¶16. (C) With its population of 1.5 million, annual per capita income of \$365, and severely resource-strapped government, The Gambia has limited capability to influence U.S. interests for good or ill. Amidst the strained

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bilateral ties, I nonetheless see various compelling reasons for our continued engagement here. One is the USG's universal commitment to foster respect for human rights and democratic norms, promote sustainable development, and provide humanitarian assistance. Another centers on the U.S.-led Global War on Terrorism; despite its meager resources, the GOTG has shown that it is capable of serving as an effective partner in that War -- despite the current uncertainty about Jammeh's reliability on that score. A third reason relates to the key U.S. interest in promoting regional peace and stability; the GOTG helps advance that interest by contributing to peacekeeping operations, most recently, sending troops to Darfur and prior to that, Liberia. As a fourth reason, there is the reservoir of pro-U.S. feeling here -- a resource to draw upon in our efforts to build popular support for our initiatives targetting African and Muslim audiences.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATION: NOT THE FIRST "ROUGH PATCH"

¶17. (C) As a final point, this is not the first "rough patch" in the U.S./Gambian relationship. Jammeh originally came to

power via a military coup in 1994 and the result was a nosedive in bilateral ties, as the U.S. responded by imposing the required sanctions on the military junta. Our relationship began to improve following Jammeh's re-election in 2002 in a contest deemed credible by the international community. The Gambian leader then took various steps to reach out to the U.S.: concluding an Article 98 Agreement with the U.S. (the second African country to do so), sharply reducing links with a heretofore key patron, Libya, adopting a more moderate and pro-Western foreign policy generally, and proving to be a useful partner in the Global War on Terrorism. He also took steps to improve the GOTG's human rights record. Our contacts believe that the mercurial Jammeh will again reach out to the U.S. at some point, perhaps when -- as widely predicted -- his new-found Iranian and Venezuelan patrons start to lose interest in their Gambian client.

STAFFORD